



An Overview of XML and the Common Record

What is XML? XML stands for EXtensible Markup Language. It is a meta-markup language designed to let developers both describe and exchange structured data between a range of applications. While it does employ the kind of tags you are used to seeing in HTML -- `<example>` `</example>` -- XML is not a replacement for HTML. XML employs tags to identify data elements, or *what data is*, while HTML is used to identify data attributes, or *how data looks*. XML can be used in conjunction with HTML to store data within standard web pages. It can also be used to store data in files and to pull information from disparate databases.

One of the objectives behind the conceptual design of COD was to provide SFA and our partnering student aid institutions greater flexibility in record processing, i.e., opportunities for multiple data cross-walks and smaller-sized files. COD was also conceived with the thought that it could serve as a technological foundation for future integration initiatives. Given these objectives, XML was the obvious choice for the common record's format and structure. XML offers the flexibility to design documents particular to an audience or community. It allows increased access and reuse of information. It supports validation [edits] by checking structural validity and flagging errors. It also enables systems to share information and users to see different views of available data.

So what will a Common Record Document look like? The common record will actually be composed of different modular blocks of information. Within the blocks, data fields will emphasize the similarities across programs. It will contain, for example, XML tags about person, award and disbursement information. You can submit a change within one set of these tags without resubmitting the whole common record.

Here is an XML example of the Person Block:

```
<Student SSNum="123456789" DOB="19820304" LastName "Jones">
  <Name>
    <FirstName>Sally</FirstName>
    <MiddleInitial>A</MiddleInitial>
    <LastName>Jones</LastName>
  </Name>
  <Contact>
    <Address>
      <Addr>531 Tower Drive Apt 3C</Addr>
      <City>Alexandria</City>
      <State>VA</State>
      <ZipCd>22314</ZipCd>
    </Address>
    <PhoneNum>2021234567</PhoneNum>
    <Email>Sally.A.Jones@email.org</Email>
  </Contact>
```



```
<Identifier>
  <DLNum>"123972" state= "VA"</DLNum>
</Identifier>
<Information>
  <DtofBirth>19820304</DtofBirth>
</Information>
</Student>
```

Detailed specifications for coding the common record will be included in the COD Technical Reference, scheduled for release at NASFAA. For participating institutions, software developers, and servicers, the transition to XML may require an initial investment of resources to build the common record. However, reformatting in subsequent years will take considerably less time and effort than updating fixed-lengths does now.

Where can I find more information?

The following is a short list of sources for more information on XML.

<http://www.w3.org/>
<http://www.ebxml.org/>
<http://www.oasis-open.org/cover/sgml-xml.html>